



Reimagining history through literary lens: A critical assessment of historians' interpretations of literature in shaping historical narratives

Maishy Charan

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Magadh University, Bodhgaya, Bihar, India

Abstract

As the rediscovery of India's past began in 19th century colonial India, Indian texts became an important medium for understanding India's culture, laws and history. Europeans trained in the objectivist tradition believed that Indians lacked historical consciousness. Though numerous historians from the 1950's began questioning the positivist conception of history and the notion that Indians lacked historical consciousness, they could not break out of many of the practises and premises laid down by colonial historiography. Thus only certain texts continued to be used to reconstruct history. Primacy was given to Sanskrit literature while vernacular literature was largely ignored. These problems are now being acknowledged and a consequent shift can be seen in the works of historians discussed in this paper. Attention is now being paid to all literary genres for historical reconstruction. More significant is the more refined conceptual frameworks that are being formulated to analyse literary texts. Historians have begun to acknowledge the need to study South Asian literature within a methodological framework that takes cognizance of the particular characteristics of local literary traditions. This paper explores the use of literature in history writing by discussing the works of Sheldon Pollock, A.K Ramanujan, Shonaleeka Kaul and Uma Chakravarti.

Keywords: Indian literary tradition, Rajatarangini, Jatakas, Kavyas

Introduction

The view that people in India lacked historical consciousness and did not produce any works of history (except Kalahana's Rajatarangini) has for long dominated the historians' view of the past. The origins of this notion can be traced to the colonial exercise of knowledge production. British administrators were trained in the positivist tradition that saw history as objective, unilinear; a discipline aimed towards reconstructing the past 'as it happened.' Indian texts on the other hand did not appear to distinguish between the secular and the religious, between myth and reality and seemed to make use only of cyclical time that was alien to Europeans familiar with unilinear progressive time.

Thus the vast literary corpus available in the subcontinent could not be readily used for historical reconstruction. This was premised on a certain understanding of history and literature that was Euro centric and stemmed from a specific 19th century European context. Literary and historical traditions were studied within this conceptual framework and one of the results was primacy given to Sanskrit while a large body of works remained ignored. (Pollock 2003)^[4].

Though numerous historians from the 1950's began questioning the positivist conception of history and the notion that Indians lacked historical consciousness, they could not break out of many of the practises and premises laid down by colonial historiography. Thus only certain texts continued to be used to reconstruct history. Primacy was given to Sanskrit literature while vernacular literature was largely ignored. Moreover works like the Jatakas that posed problems in chronology or the Kavyas that as literary works were seen as fictive and mediated were considered poor historical sources.

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discussed in this paper. Attention is now being paid to all literary genres for historical reconstruction. More significant is the more refined conceptual frameworks that are being formulated to analyse literary texts. Historians have begun to acknowledge the need to study South Asian literature within a methodological framework that takes cognizance of the particular characteristics of local literary traditions.

A.K. Ramanujan

A.K. Ramanujan adopted some very interesting methodological approaches to studying literature for history (Dharwadker 1999)^[2]. Ramanujan borrows concepts from linguistics and anthropology and studies texts and literary cultures in what Sheldon Pollock has termed historical-anthropological terms. Thus he distinguishes between context sensitive and context free rules of grammar used by linguists. He believes that cultures idealize and think in terms of either context sensitive or context free rules. In India the context sensitive formulations are found in contrast to the west where context free rules predominate. An example of this is Manu's treatise that specifies separate laws for various castes, guilds and districts while in contrast Kant's work is context free in its universality of human nature and laws that govern them. Thus Indian texts have a logic of their own that makes sense in their specific contexts but would not do so for those familiar only with context free ideals. According to Ramanujan, all Indian texts came in a context until the 19th century and the Mahabharata and Ramayana clearly state why they were written and under what circumstances. Even universal contexts like time and space are not neutral and uniform but have local properties. Thus historians should be sensitive to the context-sensitivity displayed by texts themselves which in turn make the inherent logic and coherence of the texts apparent.

The close relation between literature and context is pervasive in Ramanujan's work. The style in which great cities are described is determined by the literary traditions they were written in. Thus the polarity between the city and country in classical Sanskrit cannot be seen in early Tamil works where there is no opposition between the city and country, the city being a part of the five landscapes or *tinai*. Similarly Ramanujan posits that the reason behind the idealised portrayal of Ayodhya is the nature-culture opposition in Sanskrit where aesthetic emotion, *rasa* is given primacy over natural emotion, *bhava*. The preferred style is the former which produces a pristine, perfect image of the city since poetic language itself aimed to be aesthetically perfect. In Tamil such a dichotomy did not exist which meant nature was closely observed but not mythologised or stylised.

This leads to another interesting observation made by Ramanujan in the context of the numerous Ramayana traditions. He posits that stories may be the same but the different discourses they are expressed in alter the slant of the work with very different colours and textures. He shows this with the Ahalya story in Valmiki's and Kampan's ramayanas with different contexts, discourses producing subtle differences in the narrative. This can be seen in the focus on different characters and events in the various discourses that are produced in specific contexts some focusing on Sita others on Rama or Ravana. Ramanujan believes that these ramayana traditions bear an iconic relation to each other, are aware of other traditions and draw from them but are filled with local details; they are embedded in their contexts which produce the differences in the narratives.

Anthropology can be seen at work in Ramanujan's attempt to collect women's tales (tales about women and tales told by women) not found in texts but in the oral sphere and one that is dominated by women themselves. In these tales the conventional narrative is reversed; happiness and comfort come first and are followed by misery and hardship over which the protagonist has no control. According to Ramanujan such tales give a chance to women to rewrite their own stories. Moreover Ramanujan also makes interesting use of psychoanalysis since several stories deal with oedipal issues.

Sheldon Pollock

Sheldon Pollock's (Pollock 2003) work is a pioneering effort in this field. Pollock has pointed to the conceptual problems in existing historiography, colonial, American as well as those produced in post-independence India. The problems with colonial historiography have been mentioned above. In North America wherever South Asian literary studies were pursued they were forced into a conceptual models developed for very dissimilar traditions. The Sahitya Akademi of India was entrusted the task of writing the literary history of the newly emerged nation and this coloured its approach. Hence it adopted the motto "Indian literature is one though written in many languages". Pollock has pointed to the need for conceptual clarity regarding definitions of literature, validity of using regional and national boundaries to categorise literature (Bengali literature, Indian literature) and a need to take a closer look at even categories of language and what they mean. Pollock advocates the need for a different approach to South Asian literary cultures. This includes listening to texts rather than

simply using texts to answer our predetermined questions and focusing on their critical process rather than our critical positions. This is significant in light of the dominant practise of using texts to fit pre-existing models and set of questions that make a partial use of texts, thus not only ignoring the richness of content in literary works but also producing fractured histories. Pollock on the other hand sees literature as an integral part of the society, polity and culture.

An interesting methodological tool that Pollock points to is the need to study texts in historical-anthropological terms and try to understand what texts meant to those who wrote, read and heard them. This is also significant since historians have so far ignored this, viewing texts in terms of their own context of modernity rather than the context in which these texts were produced. Pollock also emphasises the need to explore the relationship between literature, the rich oral tradition of South Asia and the transition to manuscript culture.

Uma Chakravarti

Uma Chakravarti has studied folk tales in the Buddhist Jatakas (Chakravarty 2006) ^[1] and their interaction with Buddhist philosophy as well as folk tales shedding light on people generally excluded from intellectual production and becoming a space for subversion by these marginalised sections. Chakravarti analyses the nature of the folk tales in Jatakas taking account of the oral narration that must have been an important mode of transmitting these stories, the several layers of narratives within the story and the flexible nature of these stories that allowed Buddhists to insert their own messages in the story. Thus the Jatakas do not refer to Buddhist philosophy but deal with Buddhist ethics and imbibe Buddhist world view along with its perspective of society including the distinction it made between 'high born' and 'low born.'

Chakravarti proposes the hypotheses that folk tales project attitudes that are not allowed expression in everyday life. Hence stories abound with instances of transgressions and subversion, however temporary they may be and however terrible may the consequences be. These can be seen in tales of women (mostly reviled as wicked and capricious) and the labouring orders. Animal motifs are used in particular to show such tensions.

Shonaleeka Kaul

Shonaleeka Kaul's work adds another interesting dimension to the use of literature for historical reconstruction (Kaul 2010) ^[3]. Kaul has rightly pointed to historians' heavy emphasis on archaeology to study cities in early India while literary texts are merely used as corroborative evidence. Limitations of archaeology in studying cities is not taken account of. Kaul points out that most excavations are vertical not horizontal which do not give the total layout of the city. Moreover cities continue to be studied using Gordon Childe's model as the point of reference which has been subjected to criticism and is seen as limiting what can qualify as a city. Since archaeology is the primary method for studying cities, there is excessive focus on material remains while other dimensions of the city, the city as a phenomenon, a process, how people think of and conceptualise cities is ignored.

Kaul studies the kavyas between 600 B.C.E and 500 C.E. to focus on these very aspects of early cities that archaeology

cannot tell us. While the description of cities have been seen as literary conventions and not reflections of reality, Kaul raises the fundamental question on the need to study why descriptions of cities became a literary convention in the first place.

Kaul adopts the method of 'textual inductivism' which emphasises the need to derive reasoning from the text itself. She believes that texts have logic of their own that needs to be respected and historians should refrain from wrenching portions of the text out to fit their models, ignoring the meanings conveyed when the text is read in entirety. Kaul also argues that texts may be subjective and mediated but that is the case with all historical sources. Texts shed light on an important dimension of historical reality, that of people and their ideas. Thus texts tell us of what people are thinking and Kavyas' representation of the city may be a self-conscious reflection of urbanism.

Like Ramanujan, Kaul sees the timeless and changeless representations in Kavyas resulting from the nature of Sanskrit which was a cosmopolitan language that was non-specific and trans local.

Conclusion

In this paper we have discussed some recent works that attempt to study literary traditions for historical reconstruction in more meaningful and nuanced ways. Cultures across the globe have rich literary traditions that record historical processes in their own, context specific ways. Conceptual models that are sensitive to the context and discourses need to be formulated. More importantly literary texts must be given their due and their internal logic, the meanings they convey as a whole must be respected which is a prerequisite for a more comprehensive understanding of historical processes.

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